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Approved For Release 2007/03/09 : CIA-RDP85T00875R001100090011-5

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CIA/OCI/IN-0491/70

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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

Terrorism and Guerrilla Activity in Guatemala

State Dept. review completed

Secret

24 March 1970
No. 0491/70

Approved For Release 2007/03/09 : CIA-RDP85T00875R001100090011-5

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
24 March 1970

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Terrorism and Guerrilla Activity in Guatemala

Introduction

The terrorist problem in Guatemala may become substantially more severe in coming months. Although Communist forces remain divided, they have common objectives: to show that the government is unable to maintain security, and to force a military coup. The Communists have demonstrated an improved capability and may take advantage of the weak, lame-duck government prior to the presidential inauguration on 1 July to mount a concerted terrorist operation. Their primary immediate aim is to assassinate president-elect Carlos Arana, an act they are sure would create chaos.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates and the Clandestine Service.

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The Communist Potential

1. Secrecy and compartmentation within the Communist organizations make it difficult to assess the current Communist threat. Knowledge of the precise organizational status of the terrorists is fragmentary, but information on their plans and activities is quite good. The Communist movement is small, disunited, and incapable of a direct assault on the government's authority. The Communists have suffered steady disappointment in their effort to gain popular support and met a severe psychological defeat in the successful, honestly held elections on 1 March. Carlos Arana's expected succession to the presidency on 1 July deeply concerns them because they expect him to launch a strong counterinsurgent effort aimed at their elimination.

2. Nevertheless, the insurgency has survived for nearly a decade and may be stronger today than ever. The Communist movement was decimated during 1967 and 1968, when the government used clandestine counterterrorist groups in counterinsurgent operations. Stung by international and domestic outcries over the level of violence that attended the anti-Communist campaign, President Mendez put a halt to the program in the spring of 1968. Since then, the insurgents have been regrouping, recruiting, rearming, training, and tightening discipline.

3. Even during the time when the insurgency movement was most heavily damaged, the Communists maintained their capability for hit-and-run terrorist action. In January 1968 they shot and killed two members of the US Military Group and wounded two others. This was their first attack on US personnel in nearly three years. In August they murdered the US ambassador when he tried to resist their kidnaping attempt. In May 1969, sabotage of a television station resulted in damages of half a million dollars. In June, a prominent rightist politician, who had escaped earlier attempts on his life, was assassinated. Throughout the two-year period, less spectacular actions took place with some regularity. In rural areas, Communists assassinated

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military commissioners and other officials in order to gain the trust of the local poor, who are often victimized by government authorities. Sabotage and assassination attempts stayed at a low level in Guatemala City, but kidnaping for ransom netted large sums for the subversive movement.

4. The principal activity of the Communists after the government had ceased its counterterrorist campaign was organizational. The insurgents accurately estimated that President Mendez' termination of the counterterrorist activity would give them time and relative freedom to reconstitute their ruined support network and to shore up the weak spots that had come to light under duress. The new strategy emphasized flexibility, mobility, tighter security, and minimal dependence on those outside the hard core revolutionary cadre. During training exercises, they cached food and arms in far-flung areas of potential operation. In general, action units now seem to be small groups of persons who have proved in training that they work well together. A more strict use of pseudonyms appears to have kept the secret of personal identities within these groups.

5. In May 1968 an army patrol intercepted a Communist band that was about to receive an arms shipment across the Honduran border, and, on other occasions, arms destined for the Guatemalan guerrillas have been stopped by Mexican authorities. In general, however, land and sea borders are unguarded, and smuggling of arms and other goods is all but unrestricted. The guerrilla and terrorist groups are well-armed.

6. Since 1968, there have been several indications of continuing Cuban support for the Guatemalan insurgents

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7. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] the US presence in Guatemala is a major target of Communist terrorists. Aside from the well-publicized incidents against US personnel, there are occasional bombings of the embassy and other official installations, and officials have been harassed by written and telephoned threats. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] The Communists identify US representatives with the Guatemalan security forces and with the "repressive" government policies because of US military training of and aid to the security forces. US targets are also generally quite accessible, and actions against them gain wide publicity. Thus, they are "low risk, high return" objectives.

Recent Communist Efforts

8. The relative lull in Communist terrorism ended in December when the insurgents began their campaign to force cancellation of the March elections. During the election period, the terrorists, with virtual impunity, attacked and killed over a dozen security officials, a candidate for mayor of Guatemala City, and a highly regarded editor of the country's largest newspaper. They caused damage estimated in the millions of dollars with a series of firebombings in downtown Guatemala City. On the eve of the elections on 1 March, they secured the release of a guerrilla by kidnapping the foreign minister, and a week later obtained the release of two others in exchange for the abducted US labor attaché.

9. This recent upsurge of activity underscores what the insurgent groups are able to do. The attacks and the style of their execution demonstrate that the insurgents are well-disciplined, well-coordinated, and sophisticated. The US official who was kidnapped and released this month says that his abductors were young, cool, professional radicals who are unalterably opposed to the government, the military, and what they believe to be US intervention in Guatemalan affairs. They took pride in the international image of their group and in the credibility of their word.

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Disagreement Over Postelectoral Strategy

10. The more activist and violent of the two major Communist groups, the Cuban-oriented Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), is fanatical in its determination to step up terrorist action and may now be in a position to begin a rural guerrilla effort concurrent with its urban campaign. The Communist Party (PGT) is committed to armed revolution, but its broad strategy calls for long-term preparation of the masses as a necessary basis for wide guerrilla and terrorist operations. The PGT has tried to exert control over the FAR since it was organized in 1962, and the two groups have a history of squabbling and abortive trials at unity. Some of the PGT leaders tasted success in the classic Communist style of political penetration and semi-legal acceptance when they were the principal advisers of President Arbenz and controlled the labor and agrarian reform organizations. They probably view their political prospects now as good because they have heavily penetrated the Christian Democratic Party, which won 20 percent of the vote in the election on 1 March and will control the municipality of Guatemala City through the newly elected mayor.

11. PGT leaders reportedly are fearful that the political gains they have made might be lost by an all-out terrorist campaign that would provoke a harsh period of anti-Communist repression. Nevertheless, the PGT endorses selective assassinations against security forces and persons aligned with the right wing and occasionally cooperates with the FAR in these attacks.

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Another policeman was slain by the PGT on 15 March.

12. The PGT has an advantage over the FAR by virtue of its "connections" with the political legitimates. The camaraderie between the Communist

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and non-Communist young revolutionaries of 1944 and their association during the Arevalo and Arbenz regimes during the following decade remain a tie that serves to protect high-level party officials. Members of the PGT central commission time after time, and under different governments, have been released from police custody by official intervention. The strength of liberal political sentiment in Guatemala City--in contrast to the conservative countryside--was demonstrated in the election for mayor. The victor--Manuel Colom Argueta, a well-known far-leftist intellectual--will probably provide the PGT with the opportunity to place members or sympathizers throughout municipal offices in the capital, but not in the police.

13. The composition of the FAR leads to particularly dangerous possibilities. In contrast to the orthodox PGT, FAR members are mainly young people who are unsophisticated in world affairs, naive in their approach to national problems, and simplistic in their political thinking. The FAR considers violence the only method of undoing Guatemala's feudalistic socioeconomic structure. The terrorists believe that their persistent provocation of the security forces will lead to a bitterly harsh repressive period, which in turn will so alienate the general public that active popular support for the revolutionaries will result. The success of the FAR's terrorist action during the election period has probably increased the group's confidence in the efficacy of its training and organization. It plans to mobilize its full organization for action when the new government is installed on 1 July. President-elect Colonel Arana has staked his reputation and word on ridding the country of criminals and subversives, and he undoubtedly will launch a forceful anti-Communist campaign. The FAR intends to demonstrate that Arana is unable to stop the terrorism.

14. The FAR, according to available information, has organized into "zones" and "regionals" several guerrilla groups in various parts of the country. The guerrilla unit strengths range between

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10 and 70 armed men. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] These groups may begin a sabotage and assassination program soon. They probably intend to kill farm managers and large landowners, burn crops, block roads and carry out other actions that will raise the pressure on the government and spread the security forces thin. A long-time desire of the guerrilla leaders has been to lure the armed forces to more than one guerrilla front, and the FAR may now be prepared for complex operations.

15. The security forces have not had a major success against the subversives in over a year. President Mendez has created the illusion of improving security, but his constant shifting of personnel has meant lack of continuity and absence of coordination among the various security elements. When Arana takes office in July, he will probably inherit a badly demoralized security force that is ill prepared for the expected Communist action, but hopeful that he will give them good leadership. With the security outlook as dismal as it is, Guatemala's hopes--at least in the short term--for constructive political and economic programs from a new government are unlikely to be realized.

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